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ABSTRACT

Findings from a study that examined the effects of homogeneous ability grouping on the attitudes of secondary students toward themselves and their learning experiences are presented in this paper. Methodology involved administration of an attitudes questionnaire to 110 students enrolled in the 10th- and 11th-grade English classes at a high school in San Joaquin Valley, California. The attitudes toward self and learning experiences of high ability grouped students were compared with those of low ability grouped students. Findings indicate that no significant differences existed in attitudes toward self or learning experiences between high and low ability grouped students. Asian students reported significantly less satisfaction with their learning experiences than did White students. Factors in students' attitudes included teaching assignments, opportunities to take a variety of classes, and other unknown variables. Five tables are included. (20 references) (LMI)

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The Effects of Ability Grouping on Attitude in the Secondary School

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to examine the effects of homogeneous ability grouping on the attitudes of students in the secondary school. In order to assess these effects, a study was conducted at a secondary school in California's San Joaquin Valley. The high school is a public school with a student population of approximately 4,000. The school is also characterized by its broad ethnic diversity and socio-economic spectrum. An attitudes survey was developed and administered to 110 students in tenth and eleventh grade English classes. The study compared the attitudes toward self and attitudes toward learning experiences of high ability grouped students with those of low ability grouped students. After the data were gathered, a t-test of significance was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the attitudes of low and high ability grouped students. The results of the analysis show no significant differences in attitudes toward self or learning experiences between high and low ability grouped students. It is the conclusion of this study that further research needs to be done in this area.

The Effects of Ability Grouping on Attitude in the Secondary School

It is estimated that as many as 85% of today's schools still use homogeneous ability grouping in their effort to meet students' needs (George, 1988). The practice of grouping students by ability for purposes of instruction is a tradition practiced by most secondary schools. Largely in response to the overwhelming influx of new immigrants from Europe after the turn of the century, secondary schools found themselves forced to abandon the egalitarian ideal of a common curriculum and institutionalized curriculum differentiation "with markedly different learnings for what were seen as markedly different groups of students" (Oakes, 1985, p. 21). The practice of tracking, as the practice of homogeneous ability grouping is commonly termed (George, 1988; Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, 1985) has been consistent throughout the curriculum. Page (1987) notes that even the institution of vocational programs in many schools was often only another method of ability grouping.

One of the concerns regarding ability grouping has been its possible impact on student attitudes towards themselves and toward their learning experiences. However, studies examining the effects of ability grouping on student self-concept and attitudes toward learning experiences are inconsistent. Many researchers make strong arguments against ability grouping regarding the academic price paid by those assigned to low ability groups (Goodlad, 1984; Page, 1987; Schafer & Olexa, 1971; Oakes, 1982). Kulik and Kulik (1982) assert that ability grouping is not more effective for teaching and that, moreover, it attaches a stigma of academic and social inferiority to those students assigned to low ability groups.

The issue of students' negative attitudes toward self and their learning experiences is critical. Several researchers underscore the charge that ability

grouping damages the self-concept of students in low ability groups (Cotton, 1981; Lake, 1985; Raze, 1984). Raze (1984) asserts that most researchers report that students assigned to low ability groups experience loss of self-esteem and that "Students in the low track feel left out and feel that other students are unfriendly toward them" (p. 5). Levenson (1979) and Winn (1983) point out that students in low ability groups frequently have negative attitudes toward their school and their classes as well. Winn (1983) noted that lower ability groups developed more negative attitudes toward school. Using the technique of meta-analysis, Noland and Taylor (1982) examined the effects of ability grouping on self-concept. The studies examined compared similar students - some homogeneously grouped, others heterogeneously grouped. Self-concept was found to be lower in students who were ability grouped. Oakes (1985) conducted a thorough study that included data gathered from more than 1,000 classrooms. She found that students in high ability grouped classes had "significantly more positive attitudes about themselves and had higher educational aspirations than did students in low track classes" (Oakes, 1985, p. 143).

On the other hand, in an exhaustive meta-analysis, Kulik and Kulik (1982) examined the results of 52 studies of secondary schools. These studies reported results on effects of ability grouping in four areas: student achievement, self-concept, attitude toward school, and attitude toward subject matter. Fifteen studies were directed exclusively at self-concept. In only two studies was the effect of ability grouping on self-concept statistically significant. And, according to the researcher, the effect was "a trivial one" (Kulik and Kulik pp. 423 - 424). With regard to attitudes toward subject matter and attitudes toward school, Kulik and Kulik (1982) found that, in fact, ability grouping had a positive effect on student attitudes toward their subjects and no significant

difference in student attitude toward school between students of different ability groups. In a later meta-analysis Kulik (1985) reported results of research which included 40 elementary schools and 45 secondary schools. There were 24 studies that were clustered in a group that assessed self-concept.

Unfortunately, the number of the 24 studies which represented secondary schools is not indicated. Nevertheless, Kulik (1985) reports that the effects of ability grouping on self-concept were minimal and that students from grouped and ungrouped classes had nearly identical scores.

A significant concern, however, exists regarding meta-analyses. Without access to the multiple studies themselves or to the ones eliminated from the meta-analysis, it is difficult to assess the validity of their conclusions. Kulik and Kulik (1982), for example, noted that in their weeding process they deliberately omitted studies that used anecdotal reports. While it may be difficult to assess the results of anecdotal reporting, such observations may be useful in producing a more complete picture of the impact of ability grouping practices - especially when attempting to assess self-concept and attitudes toward learning experiences. In addition, such meta-analyses assume the equal usefulness and validity of the varied research instruments employed by the researchers whose studies are used in the meta-analysis. The variety of testing instruments, along with the possibly different variables with which each study may have operated, inspire many questions. In fact, Kulik (1985) himself cautions: "Our analysis did not identify settings in which programs of homogeneous instruction were more or less successful. Nor did it throw light on experimental design features that help investigators get clear results" (Kulik, 1985 p. 7).

Several studies produced mixed results (Byrne, 1988; Oakes, 1982; Prawat, Lanier, Byers, and Anderson, 1983). Using data accumulated by Goodlad (1984), Oakes (1982) found uneven effects of ability grouping on student self-

concept and student attitude. Oakes (1982) found that students in high ability groups did have "significantly more positive attitudes about themselves . . . than did students in low track classes" (Oakes, p. 208). On the other hand, no significant differences were found in student attitudes toward their subjects, their classroom, or their schools.

Prawat, et al. (1983), in a study of attitudinal differences between students in math and algebra classes, found mixed results as well. While they found no significant differences between attitudes of low ability math students and high ability algebra students toward their subject matter or toward their school, they did find some attitude differences connected with self-concept. "The only significant main effect curricular difference was obtained on the self-esteem measure, with algebra students responding more positively than those in general math. . . ." (Prawat, et al., p. 217). Both pre-testing and post-testing produced similar results. Moreover, students in algebra were found to have much more positive attitudes toward their learning experiences than students in lower ability, general math classes (Prawat, et al., 1983). The discrepancy in the results of their assessment left Prawat, et al. with many questions (1983). How, for instance, could low ability students have negative attitudes toward themselves, negative attitudes toward their learning experiences, and still have positive attitudes toward school and the subject itself?

In still another study of mixed results, Byrne (1988) studied the academic, math, English, and general self-concepts of 248 low ability and 582 high ability grouped students. Twelve standardized self-report, self-concept instruments found significant differences in English, math, and academic self-concept. However, no significant differences were found in general self-concept between high and low ability groups. Byrne (1988) speculated that student general self-concept may be more greatly related to factors other than the classroom. Social

popularity and physical ability, for example, may act as compensatory elements in students' general self-concept.

While the conclusions of the studies seem to be inconsistent and inconclusive, a trend of mixed results does emerge: homogeneous ability grouping does seem to make a difference in students' attitudes toward self (self-concept), with low ability grouped students having a more negative self-concept than high ability grouped students; however, there appear to be no significant differences between high and low ability grouped students in attitudes toward school or subject studied.

It may be worthwhile to note that, in most studies, the assessment of student attitude differences was ancillary to the study of achievement differences (Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Oakes, 1982; Page, 1987; Schafer & Olexa, 1971). Also, the issue of causality arises; do students develop negative attitudes toward self and their learning experiences by being placed in low ability classes, or do students with negative attitudes toward self and their learning experiences get assigned disproportionately to low ability classes in part because of those negative attitudes. It may also be the case that students with low ability may be less articulate in reporting their feelings about their academic skills than high ability students. In addition, another point about the validity of various meta-analyses can be made: questions arise especially when studies of elementary school subjects are included in the same sample group as secondary school subjects. Clearly, more research is needed in the area of homogeneous ability grouping and its effects on students' attitudes toward themselves and toward their learning experiences. In brief, does ability grouping produce more negative attitudes toward self in students in the low ability grouped classes than it does in those students in high ability grouped classes? And does ability grouping produce more negative attitudes toward learning experiences in low ability

grouped classes than for students in high ability grouped classes? This study was conducted to provide information that will address these questions and to test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis one: There is a significant effect of homogeneous ability grouping upon student attitude toward self.

Hypothesis two: There is a significant effect of homogeneous ability grouping on student attitude toward learning experiences.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 110 students enrolled in the tenth and eleventh grade English classes at a secondary school in the San Joaquin Valley of California. The high school is a public school with a student population of approximately 4,000 students. All ninth graders attend a separate campus called East Campus; nevertheless, the separate campus, while somewhat autonomous, is treated as part of a unified school. It is the only high school in the state of California with this configuration. Tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders attend a separate campus called North Campus. The reason for these designations is implied by their names. English students are placed on "tracks" or ability groups based on scores achieved on the Gates-MacGinney reading test, F-level. Counselor, teacher, and parent recommendation are criteria that are also used to make placements in these ability groups. High ability groups are referred to as "A track"; low ability groups are referred to as "B track." Students in advanced placement or remedial classes were not included in the sample.

The subjects for this sample were selected from the low ability grouped and high ability grouped classes of students at the tenth and eleventh grade levels. A few twelfth graders repeating a failed English course were included in the

sample. A systematic sample (Babbie, 1989, p. 184) was taken from a print-out of all tenth and eleventh grade students who were enrolled in a required English class. Twelfth grade students are allowed to take other courses to meet their fourth year English requirement; hence, they were omitted from the sample. As some students were unable to be sampled for reasons of transfer or other reasons, the sample included 55 students from the low ability group and 55 students from the high ability group. The students represent a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Sixty-three (57%) students were male, while 47 (43%) were female. Forty-three (39%) identified themselves as white, and 39 (35%) of the students identified themselves as Hispanic. These groups comprised the greater part of the sample population. Of the others, 16 (15%) indicated Asian ethnicity, 7 (6%) indicated African-American ethnicity, and 5 (2%) chose to be classified as "other." Students ranged in age from approximately 16 to 17. The sample also represents students from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds, reflective of the socio-economic character of the surrounding community.

Questionnaire Development

The attitudes questionnaire was generated by this researcher. The survey is composed of 25 statements expressive of attitudes toward self and toward learning experiences. The first group of statements (1 - 10) consists of assertions regarding feelings toward self (self-concept). The next 15 statements (11 - 25) consist of assertions regarding subject matter, teacher, and classroom environment. The survey was constructed using a Likert-type scale on which students indicated various levels of agreement and disagreement with the statements presented. Items on the survey were composed by this researcher based on their simplicity of construction and directness of expression with the expectation that these characteristics would produce the most accurate

responses. The students were asked to circle their responses. The survey was initially given to this researcher's own students to test the ease of student comprehension of the instrument. Several questions were rephrased and instructions simplified in response to student reaction. In addition, a professor of education reviewed the survey instrument.

Some nominal data were requested regarding student ethnic background, gender, and grade level. The responses were assigned a numerical value in the following manner:

5 = strongly agree

4 = agree

3 = unsure

2 = disagree

1 = strongly disagree

Some statements were composed in such a way that agreement indicated the presence of an opposite attitude. These statements were assigned a negative value in the following manner:

1 = strongly agree

2 = agree

3 = unsure

4 = disagree

5 = strongly disagree

All students were given the same survey as only one form of the survey was generated.

Procedure

The surveys were distributed at a meeting of the English department at which time the procedures for administration, collection, and return were explained. In

all, 15 teachers were involved in the administration of the survey. They were instructed to give the survey during the same 2 day period in May, at the beginning of the final grading period of the 1990-91 academic year. The teachers were instructed to explain the purpose of the survey and to allow students time to complete the survey with as much privacy as possible. They were also instructed to indicate on the survey the ability group of the students taking the survey. Teachers were then instructed to place the surveys in the envelope provided and return them. Absent students were given surveys upon their return when possible.

Results

Two hypotheses were tested in this study. The first considered whether or not high ability grouped and low ability grouped students differed significantly in their attitudes toward self (self-concept). The second addressed the question of whether or not high and low ability groups differed significantly in their attitudes toward their learning experiences. *T*-tests of significance were conducted to determine differences between the two groups on these two issues. The results are described below.

Responses Regarding Attitudes Toward Self

When high ability grouped and low ability grouped students' attitudes toward self were compared, no significant differences were found ($t(108) = 1.41$). This table presents the means of the high and low ability groups and the *t*-test results of the analysis of data from the group of statements (1 - 10) involving attitudes toward self.

Place Table 1 about here

Responses Regarding Attitudes Toward Learning Experiences

In a comparison of high ability grouped and low ability grouped students' attitudes toward their learning experiences, no significant differences were found ($t(108) = 1.41$). This table presents the means of high and low ability groups and the t -test results of the analysis of data from the group of statements (11 - 25) involving attitudes toward learning experiences.

Place Table 2 about here

Post Hoc Analysis

Subsequent t -tests comparing learning experience attitudes of Hispanic and white students also revealed no significant differences. However, a significant difference was found in a comparison of learning experience attitudes of Asian students with those of white students ($t(57) = 2.5$).

Place Table 3 about here

This difference indicates that Asian students have a significantly greater number of negative attitudes toward their learning experiences than do white students. This difference, however, was not connected to ability grouping and is, therefore, only a secondary interest to this study. Perhaps this difference arises from the greater emphasis on the importance of education that is believed to be traditional in the Asian community; hence, Asians may have a greater concern about their learning experiences and a tendency to be more critical. One can only speculate at this point.

The raw data produce a very vivid picture of the similarity in the range of

responses between high and low ability groups regarding attitudes toward both self and learning experiences. Table 4 presents a distribution of the responses from both high and low ability grouped students regarding the statements involving attitude toward self.

Place Table 4 about here

Table 5 presents a distribution of the responses from high and low ability grouped students regarding the statements involving attitude toward learning experiences.

Place Table 5 about here

Discussion

Results failed to support the hypothesis that high ability grouped students differ in their attitudes toward self from low ability grouped students. Students in this school's different "tracks" do not feel differently about themselves as a consequence of ability group placement. In an ancillary comparison, no significant differences could be found in a *t*-test comparing attitudes toward self of Hispanic students to those of white students. Nor was a significant difference found when comparing attitudes toward self of Asian students with those of white students. No attempt was made to compare groups with African-Americans as they comprised less than .06% of the sample population.

One explanation of these results is that ability group placement is not a critical element in shaping student attitudes toward self at the high school

studied and that how students feel about themselves is not a function of "track" placement. Another explanation might be that track placement establishes a comparison group to which a student may compare himself/herself, and tracking may affect self concept by changing comparison groups.

The second hypothesis is also rejected by the results of the survey. Data do not support the hypothesis that high ability grouped students differ from low ability grouped students in their attitudes toward their learning experiences. The exception is that Asian students seemed less satisfied with their learning experiences than white students. However, in regard to the central issue of this study, low ability grouped students seem as satisfied with their teachers, their subject, and their classmates as do high ability grouped students.

Conclusions

It seems clear that significant differences do not exist in attitudes toward self and attitudes toward learning experiences between high ability grouped and low ability grouped students at the high school studied. Several factors may have contributed to these results.

First, at the school studied, the manner in which teaching assignments are made may be a factor. In several studies, for example, it was implied that better teachers are assigned high ability grouped students, while weaker teachers are characteristically assigned low ability grouped students (Oakes, 1988; Gamoran & Berends, 1987; Schafer & Olexa, 1971). At the high school in this study, English teachers characteristically divide high ability grouped and low ability grouped classes among themselves rather evenly so that all teachers teach both levels of ability. This practice may help explain, in part, the lack of a significant difference in students' attitudes toward learning experiences. It seems apparent that any further study of students' attitudes should consider this variable as it may be critical in explaining the different conclusions to which

researchers have come.

Another factor which may account for the lack of significant differences in students' attitudes toward self and toward learning experiences is the fact that many of the classes students take are not ability grouped and, therefore, the opportunity for students of widely differing abilities to have common experiences in common environments does exist. For instance, regardless of ability, students may take gym, art, foreign language, industrial arts, home economics, agriculture, drama, music, and other classes in heterogeneous groups. Moreover, school clubs, organizations, activities, and athletic teams seem to cut across ability levels. Truly, the opportunities for socializing activities for all ability groups in school, at extra-curricular events, and activities outside the purview of the school altogether are present for all students and may also help explain the lack of differences in students' attitudes.

Finally, the inability of the researcher to control some variables may contribute to the inconsistency of results among researchers in testing for student attitudes. Teacher quality, competence, hiring practices, administrative support, curricula, classroom design, campus security, counseling resources, and community and family support are only some of the variables that the researcher was not able to control. In fact, many studies may have their validity undermined by the proliferation of such variables. And it is certainly possible that some of these variables or a combination of them may be more critical than the practice of ability grouping itself in shaping student attitudes. Moreover, the test instrument itself may yield inaccurate data as it was not field tested for validity or reliability. As well, the process of student self-reporting on issues of personal attitudes, upon which the survey relied for its data, seems to invite questions about the accuracy of student responses. It may be that asking students to select from among one or two- word responses for such complex

feelings oversimplifies the research problem.

Even more fundamentally, whether or not a stigma affixes itself to ability grouping at all may certainly depend in part upon the value that the student population, their families, and the community assign to academic achievement and educational advancement. These variables must, in part, be a function of the demographics of the community and the socio-economic character of the community. It may well be that some communities affirm the value of academic achievement more ardently and more overtly than others; hence, tests and studies may produce differing results.

Clearly, the practice of ability grouping for instruction is likely to continue in some form or other in many secondary schools throughout our nation, and further study seems to be in order so that educationally responsible choices can be made by those who make school policy and shape school practices. Today's schools continue to grapple with the problem of unequal educational opportunities provided to our youth. The issue of unfairness is almost implicit in the practice of any form of discrimination, no matter how inadvertent or how well motivated. It is critical, therefore, to learn as much as possible about the impact of homogeneous ability grouping on student achievement and student attitudes.

However, opponents of ability grouping ought, perhaps, to make their case on the merits of the more persuasive argument that ability grouping creates significant differences in student achievement.

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Table 1
Comparison of Means and *t*-test Results of High and Low Ability Grouped
Students Regarding Attitude Toward Self

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>t - test</u>
High Ability	26	6.75	1.41
Low Ability	24.14	6.95	

Table 2
Comparison of Means and t-test Results of High and Low Ability Grouped
Students Regarding Attitude Toward Learning Experiences

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>t - test</u>
High Ability	32.8	8.01	1.41
Low Ability	35	8.36	

Table 3
Comparison of Means and *t*-test Results of Asian Students and White Students
Regarding Attitude Toward Learning Experiences

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>t-test</u>
Asian	29.25	7.03	2.50
White	34.42	7.01	

Table 4
Response Distribution of High and Low Ability Grouped Students Regarding
Attitude Toward Self

Item/Group (N=110)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Most People Are Better Liked Than I am.					
High	0	10	21	16	8
Low	4	13	20	15	3
2. I Often Wish I Could Be Someone Else.					
High	6	10	8	20	11
Low	8	10	6	16	15
3. I Often Feel Sad Or Unhappy.					
High	8	10	9	23	5
Low	4	19	8	17	7
4. A Lot Of Things Get Me Down.					
High	3	13	5	24	10
Low	5	15	8	19	8
5. I'm Not A Very Capable Person Overall.					
High	3	2	7	22	21
Low	4	6	8	29	8
6. I Often Don't Like The Way I Act.					
High	5	10	11	26	3
Low	2	14	10	19	10
7. I Have A Lot Of Confidence In Myself.					
High	12	28	9	4	2
Low	17	19	10	6	3

8. Most People Are Happier Than I Am.

High	4	7	18	18	8
Low	5	17	13	15	5

9. It's Easy For Me To Make Friends.

High	14	24	9	7	1
Low	10	30	7	6	2

10. I Look Forward To The Future.

High	27	19	7	2	0
Low	20	22	8	4	1

Table 5
Response Distribution of High and Low Ability Grouped Students Regarding
Attitude Toward Learning Experiences

Item/Group (N=110)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
11. I Enjoy Being In This Class.					
High	7	27	16	3	2
Low	8	26	10	8	3
12. I Know My English Class Is Important.					
High	24	26	5	0	0
Low	20	30	3	1	1
13. I Look Forward To Coming To This Class.					
High	7	22	17	7	2
Low	7	22	15	9	2
14. I Know I Am Learning Things In This Class That Will Be Helpful In My Future.					
High	21	24	5	3	2
Low	21	19	8	3	4
15. The Things We Study In This Class Are Interesting.					
High	10	23	10	9	3
Low	7	27	11	7	3
16. I Am Good At English.					
High	2	23	17	9	4
Low	5	18	16	11	5

17. I Am Comfortable And Relaxed In This Class.

High	15	30	7	3	0
Low	8	31	12	4	0

18. I Can Tell That The Teacher Wants Us To Learn.

High	18	28	9	0	0
Low	30	22	3	0	0

19. I Can Tell That The Teacher Works Hard In This Class.

High	18	28	6	1	2
Low	21	26	3	3	2

20. I Can Tell The Teacher Feels That English Is An Important Subject.

High	23	26	5	1	0
Low	26	25	2	1	1

21. I Usually Try My Best In This Class.

High	7	26	12	8	2
Low	12	21	8	12	2

22. I Like Most Of The Other Students In This Class.

High	16	28	6	3	2
Low	12	30	6	5	2

23. Sometimes I Feel I Can't Learn In This Class.

High	5	8	8	25	9
Low	3	15	8	26	3

24. Students In This Class Are Well Behaved.

High	5	17	22	8	3
Low	5	12	17	13	8

25. Students In This Class Are Cooperative And Friendly.

High	13	31	8	1	2
Low	3	27	10	9	6